

To: Phil North/R10/USEPA/US@EPA;Michael Szerlog/R10/USEPA/US@EPA[]; ichael Szerlog/R10/USEPA/US@EPA[]
From: "Shoren Brown"
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twitter.com/joelconnelly

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A mind-boggling Alaska mine

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By JOEL CONNELLY
SEATTLEPI.COM STAFF

KING SALMON, Alaska -- A bumper sticker reading "EARTH FIRST: We'll Mine the Other Planets Later" decorated Rick Halford's office in days when the game guide and pilot was president of the Alaska State Senate.

"I have been a mining advocate all my life," Halford said.

Until, that is, a giant gold-copper-molybdenum mine was proposed between two of Bristol Bay's major salmon spawning streams and just west of Alaska's largest lake. "Iliamna Lake is the largest red salmon rearing area in the world," Halford added.

"I can't imagine a worse location for a mine of this type, unless it were in my kitchen," former Alaska Gov. Jay Hammond, who lived nearby at Lake Clark, said shortly before his death. Widow Bella Hammond is an active mine foe.

The Pebble Mine project has drawn opposition that ranges from native corporations to major jewelry firms to Bristol Bay lodge owners. It has spawned a new generation of chef-activists at Seattle restaurants such as Andaluca, Flying Fish, Ray's Boathouse and the Steelhead Diner.

Five of America's leading jewelry retailers -- Seattle-based Ben Bridge Jeweler, Tiffany & Co., Helzberg Diamonds, Fortunoff and Leber Jewelry -- have signed a pledge never to source their gold from the Pebble Mine.

Lindsey Bloom, a Whitman-educated fishing boat captain, puts it bluntly. "Everyplace else you look -- down where you come from, for instance -- fisheries have been badly managed and are in peril: Here, this place, is the exception."

The Pebble Mine is a dream -- though not yet a plan -- of British-based Anglo-American PLC, famed for its South Africa operations, and Northern Dynasty Minerals, Ltd., a Vancouver-based Canadian firm.

Its potential dimensions are mind-boggling. The final mine site would probably cover 15 square miles, and include both underground and open pit mines.

"By 2006 estimates, the open pit mine would be two miles wide and produce up to 2.5 billion tons of acid-generating waste rock and discharged chemicals," the Bristol Bay Native Corp. reported earlier this month.

The mine plans to store tailings waste in artificial lakes, restrained by earthen dams. The largest of the dams, by 2006 estimate, would be 740 feet tall and 4.3 miles long. The mine would require an 80-mile-long road to a port facility on Cook Inlet.

Resource industries, notably Big Oil, rule Alaska. Wild and crazy projects have long appealed to the state's boomer mentality -- even Project Chariot, a scheme by "Father of the H-Bomb" Dr. Edward Teller to have a nuclear weapon carve out a harbor at the native village Point Hope.

"They come to you and promise benefits: They never explain costs that we might have to bear," Carolyn Cannon, head of tribal government at Point Hope. She remembers high incidence of cancers long after Teller & Co. departed, and casts a skeptical eye at the Pebble Mine.

The proposed mine lies in the midst of a vibrant part of Alaska's economy: The commercial, native and sport fishery around Bristol Bay pumps up to \$400 million a year into the state's economy.

Brian Kraft, owner of Alaska Sportsman's Lodge, initially favored the mine until he looked at its locale. "The water table is at six feet," he said. "There is certain to be discharge and seepage. The fish are supplied 80 percent from ground water. You don't want to start playing around with these aquifers."

The would-be mine developers have a simple message: Don't judge us until we produce a plan.

"I don't know that we can do (Pebble Mine). I don't have a project right now to present to the public that I can say meets the high environmental standards that I know we have to meet, and is economic -- the two challenges we have," John Shively, Pebble Limited Partnership CEO recently told the Rotary Club of Juneau.

Opponents counter that Alaska's Department of Natural Resources -- which Shively once headed -- has stacked its land classifications and rules to give the Pebble Mine a green light.

The Bristol Bay Native Corp., which has 8,600 Eskimo, Aleut and Athabascan shareholders, has asked the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency to intervene. It wants EPA to step in under the Clean Water Act and prohibit discharge of dredged or fill material from the mine.

U.S. Rep. Don Young, longtime slurry-carrier for the mining industry, has introduced legislation that would strip the EPA of its authority to put anyplace off limits to mine tailings.

"Risks to Bristol Bay resources from leaching and potential dam failure are something that the people of this region will face long after the proposed mine has stripped the mineral wealth and ceased operating," the Bristol Bay natives said in their petition to EPA.

It gets down to not only dollars and cents, but what Alaskans love to do -- fish and fly.

Halford produces a slide showing his plane floating on a sparkling blue tarn called Fryingpan Lake. "This is," he said, "a lake they would put hundreds of feet under tailings."

Pebble Pine is Alaska's latest environmental battle for the ages. Forget Sarah Palin or would-be Wasilla mayor Levi Johnston. This is what will shape the future of the 49th State.

Joel Connelly can be reached at 206-448-8160 or joelconnelly@seattlepi.com. Follow Joel on Twitter at twitter.com/joelconnelly.

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